

# **\*\*ATTENTION\*\***

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# Return of the Bluebirds

by George F. Walter

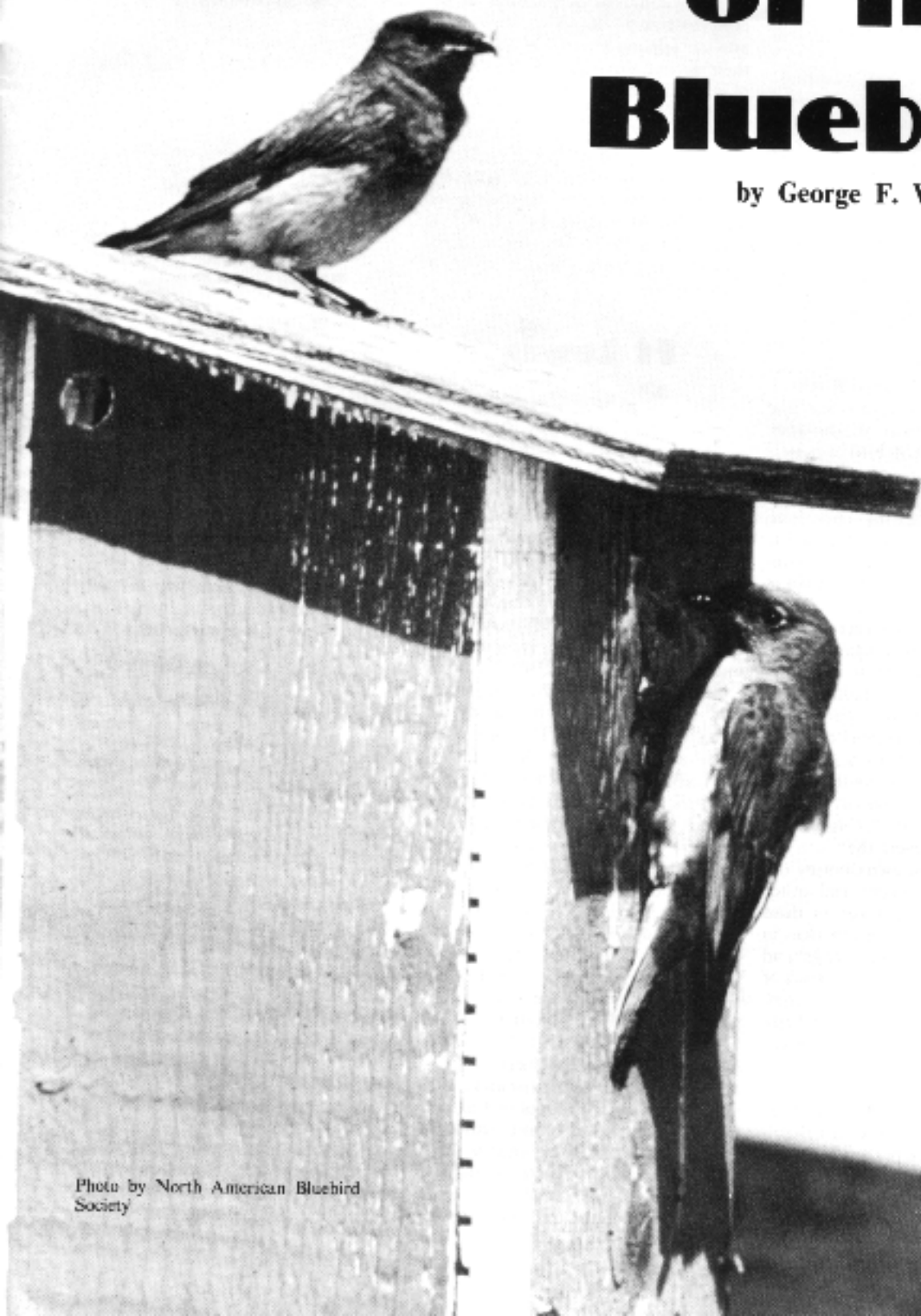


Photo by North American Bluebird  
Society

# Return of the Bluebirds

"Where have all the bluebirds gone?"

They were our first bird of spring - our "blue robin." The brilliant blue of the male bluebird, flashing in the sunlight, was a common and inspiring sight. But few people can enjoy that sight nowadays.

In Washington, we have two bluebird species. The Mountain Bluebird, as its name implies, is found primarily at higher elevations. The Western Bluebird is more widely distributed, from sea level up into the foothills, in fields and pastures, orchards and open woodlots.

Fifty years ago, Western Bluebirds were among the most familiar and popular birds of Western Washington. Today, even dedicated bird watchers have difficulty locating bluebirds here and many life-long residents have never seen this beautiful, once-common bird. Although more frequently found in eastern Washington, numbers there are also much lower than in past years.

To understand this severe population decline, one must examine the bluebird's life habits. It is primarily an insect eater, but increased use of insecticides has destroyed part of its food base, both here in their breeding territory and in their wintering grounds further to the south.

Secondly, bluebirds are cavity nesters, requiring a cavity for successful reproduction. However, they are unable to excavate their own cavities, depending on woodpeckers and other cavity-makers to bore holes in dead trees and fence posts. The practices in recent years of removing snags and decaying trees, and the substitution of metal fence posts for wooden ones, have reduced the supply of nest holes and has increased competition from other cavity-nesting species for the remaining ones.

Bluebirds also have been hurt by the loss of habitat to suburban development and farming practices. In addition, two alien bird species that frequent human dwellings and use areas, the House Sparrow and the Euro-

pean Starling, have expanded into bluebird areas as human habitation has expanded. These two species are very aggressive and displace bluebirds, as well as other native species, when they occur in the same area.

The willingness of bluebirds to accept cavities produced by others creates an opportunity for us to reverse their decline through the introduction of artificial nesting boxes into suitable habitat. This practice has proved successful for the Eastern Bluebird in wide areas of eastern North America, where hundreds of bluebird box trails have been constructed. Bluebird trails have also been established a few places in the West; however until recently, there were none in Western Washington.

## Fort Lewis Project

One of the areas where bluebirds remained has been the prairie/oak woodlands area of rural southwest Pierce County and adjacent Thurston County. They were not common, however, despite the presence of large tracts of ideal habitat. A substantial portion of this area is within the borders of the Fort Lewis Military Reservation and therefore is somewhat undeveloped.

Beginning in 1980, there was an effort begun to place bluebird nest boxes on Fort Lewis. The author became associated with this effort in 1981. Beginning in 1983, volunteers from the Olympia and Tacoma area, in part from the Tahoma Audubon Society, provided crucial assistance that allowed for the project to expand substantially. The project is entirely voluntary and has received important material support from the Fish and Wildlife Section of the Fort Lewis Directorate of Engineering and Housing.

The project has been dramatically successful and has proved that bluebird boxes will work in Western Washington. In 1984, forty bluebird pairs produced approximately 120 fledglings from the boxes of the Fort Lewis project. Boxes were also used by swallows, predominantly Tree Swallows, and by House Wrens.

In addition, we have learned quite a bit about bluebird behavior and the

habitats frequented by them in western Washington. On Fort Lewis, boxes were installed on oak trees at the edge of prairies, in oak groves and old orchards, along fence rows, and in new clearcuts. (Actually, these were not true clearcuts, since on Fort Lewis, scattered trees, including oaks, are left standing to provide wildlife habitat.) The key characteristic for all habitat types is the presence of open ground nearby for the bluebird's hunting territory. Boxes located too deep in woods, or in deep shade, were not utilized, nor were areas with heavy undergrowth.

## What Can You Do?

If you live near or have access to bluebird habitat, perhaps you would like to begin your own bluebird trail. Wonderful! There is a great shortage of nest cavities and your boxes are certain to be utilized.

Boxes can be made in a variety of ways and patterns, but should be made of wood. There are a few crucial elements, however, that will discourage predators and competitors. First, the entrance hole must be 1 1/2 inches in diameter, but no greater. This size hole is large enough for bluebirds (and swallows) but too small for starlings. Second, do not add a perch to the box. Bluebirds do not need a perch, but predators can use a perch to harass the bluebirds. The box should be deep, at least 6" from the entrance hole to the floor. It is best if the roof is slanted.

Box material should be at least 5/8 inch thick, with 1" preferable since it offers greater insulation. It is best to design boxes so that they can be opened readily for cleaning. Removing the first nest material after the young have fledged encourages a second nesting. (Of the Fort Lewis pairs, 30-50 percent made a second nest attempt.) Boxes need not be painted.

Boxes may be placed on any sound support material such as fence posts and trees, well away from houses and outbuildings when House Sparrows are common. The box should be four to six feet from the ground. House



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Sparrows prefer high nest cavities, so placing boxes as low as possible discourages them; however, higher placement is necessary when you know that predators such as raccoons and cats frequent the areas. The ideal direction to orient the box is southeast, facing toward the morning sun and away from the prevailing winds, but any direction other than northeast to northwest is acceptable.

On Fort Lewis, many of the boxes were put up in pairs, thus providing one box for bluebirds and one for swallows. This is done because swallows have been known to drive bluebirds away from their nest box when cavities are scarce. Boxes should be put up in February and March since that is the season that bluebirds are moving around looking for nesting territories. On Fort Lewis, bluebirds first arrive in late February, and by mid-April most pairs are beginning serious nest construction. Boxes may be installed permanently with 16d galva-

nized nails, if they are likely to be secure from vandalism, or they may be installed with screws and removed seasonally. Pairs of boxes should be separated by at least 100 yards if possible.

Placement of boxes in appropriate habitat is crucial. In addition to the habitat types discussed above, bluebird boxes may be successful in gardens, cemeteries, golf courses, and open waste areas. It appears from our experience on Fort Lewis that bluebirds frequently invade newly-cleared areas. Thus, ideal areas to consider for bluebird boxes are recent burns and clearcuts, provided there are some remaining snags to support boxes.

Finally, what you can do is practice good habitat maintenance and ask others to do likewise. Leave snags standing—resist the temptation to cut them for firewood. Encourage developers of bluebird habitat areas to plan their activities to minimize impact upon and be compatible with bluebird

habitat. This is especially important for the rapidly decreasing number of prairie/oak woodland areas.

With habitat maintenance and with nest box projects to replace lost nesting cavities, it again may be common to see that flash of brilliant blue and thus to know the truth of the expression, "there is no blue like the bluebird's blue!" □

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*George F. Walter lives near Roy, Washington, adjacent to Fort Lewis, and has had bluebirds nesting in his garden for the last two years. He is an Environmental Specialist in the Department of Fisheries of the Nisqually Indian Tribe. Walter has offered to assist anyone in getting started to help our bluebirds, and is interested in exchanging information about bluebirds in western Washington. His address is P.O. Box 303, Roy, WA 98580.*